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# Tyranny in the West from Homer to Solzhenitsyn: Suggestions for Reading*

## History, Politics, Philosophy

**Homer, *Iliad.***

Centers on the heroic warlord Achilles' rage against his commander-in-chief Agamemnon for disrespecting him, prompting Achilles, the Greek's best fighter, to avenge himself by deserting his comrades in their war against the Trojans. Which of them—Achilles or Agamemnon—is more of a tyrant? Focus on Books 1, 3, 6, 9, 14-18, 20-23

**Sophocles, *Oedipus the Tyrant.***

Oedipus, an adopted child from another kingdom, becomes the tyrant of Thebes by saving the city from a monster, but will soon be exposed for unknowingly murdering his real father (the former King of Thebes) and marrying his mother (the Queen), leading to his downfall. The Theban people are grateful to Oedipus for saving the city, but increasingly worried that he has too much power over them.

**Plato, *Republic*, Book 9.**

The most famous denunciation of the tyrant's way of life as unjust and depraved. The tyrant, according to Plato, mirrors the worst vices of the mob, and incites them to rebel against their betters by promising them ever more pleasure and wealth. It provided the basis for the Roman historian Sallust's denunciation of the attempt by Catiline, a corrupt aristocratic adventurer, to become tyrant of Rome by pandering to the lower classes' resentment of his fellow aristocrats. Alexander Hamilton warned against a "Catiline" emerging in the new American democracy disguised as a champion of the common people, and argued in *Federalist* 9 that the American constitution of checks and balances would avoid the tendency of the ancient Greeks to careen between the extremes of tyranny and anarchy.

**Aristotle, *Politics.***

Book 2: Is there such a thing as a natural master and a natural slave? How much private property do people need to be happy? Are tyrants motivated by greed or by a love of supreme honor?
Books 3: Good systems of government versus bad ones, tyranny being the worst. But can a ruler exercise total power, unconstrained by law, without being considered a tyrant if it is for the benefit of the entire society?

**Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Chapters 6, 9, 15, 25.**

Why politics should be about what man really is, not what he ought to be according to some religious or philosophical ideal. It's natural for people to want safety and prosperity, and that's what a prince should provide for them. If that means securing power through ruthless means, the end—the wealth and security of the common people—justifies the means.

**Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, Book 1.**

Is there any justification for imposing a collectivist society on people that will, as Rousseau puts it, "force them to be free" by making them behave virtuously and give up all forms of individual self-interest and political faction? Many see Rousseau's argument as the beginning of modern totalitarianism.

**Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*.**

Edmund Burke supported the American Revolution because it was based on giving people their liberty as individuals, but denounced the French Revolution for—by contrast and in accordance, in Burke's view, with Rousseau's teaching—trying to create a collectivist society by imposing total equality through the use of terror against the privileged orders.

**Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*. Parts 1 and 2.**

Marx's famous denunciation of the ravages of capitalism, and his conviction that, precisely through its unprecedented tyrannical oppression of the masses, it will act as "its own grave-digger" by radicalizing the workers, who through revolution will bring about a new world in which state power and private property will vanish.

## Literature, Poetry, Drama

**Shakespeare, *Richard the Second*.**

The story of how Henry Bolingbroke, a master of Machiavellian deception, usurped the throne of the flawed Christian monarch Richard the Second. Though set in the 14th century, Shakespeare depicts Bolingbroke as a "stage Machiavel" whose combination of craftiness, ruthlessness, and taking care of the material needs of the common people points to the politics of the modern age.

**Marlowe, *The Jew of Malta*.**

Marlowe does Shakespeare one better on the "stage Machiavel" by having Machiavelli himself appear as a character in the play's opening Prologue, uttering the famous line — a pretty accurate interpretation of Machiavelli's own writings—"I count religion but a childish toy/And hold there is no sin but ignorance." In other words, in the modern age, old-fashioned virtue and piety don't count for much. What matters is knowing how to get ahead through practicing the skills of deception, propaganda and intimidation.

**Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, Book Eleventh.**

In terms remarkably similar to Burke, Wordsworth recalls the French Revolution, which he witnessed as a young man in Paris, as a time when all tradition, custom, and social hierarchy was to be destroyed overnight in order to create a completely new kind of human being empty of any ties to the past, and who could thereby be submerged in a collective of equally empty individuals. Wordsworth came to regret his early enthusiasm for the Revolution when he realized that terror and mass executions were the inevitable consequence of attempting to create a perfect society overnight by getting rid of the aristocracy and the Church.

**Tolstoy, *War and Peace*.**

Napoleon is a classic example of a ruler exercising the absolute power of a tyrant in order, as he sees it, to improve people's lives. Through his blood-thirsty conquests, he spread the principles of the modern age throughout Europe, including the right to rise through individual merit rather than inherited privilege, the right to divorce, religious toleration, and civil liberties for Europe's Jews. Through his character Pierre Bezukhov, Tolstoy examines the dilemma—shared by many—of whether Napoleon should be admired for spreading modern values to backward countries like Russia or hated for attempting to do so through conquest.

**Flaubert, *Sentimental Education*.**

In *Democracy in America*, the young Alexis de Tocqueville forecast the danger that a "democratic despot" might arise in America who would win popular support by relieving people of the burden of self-government and taking care of their material needs. Ironically, Tocqueville lived to see this democratic despot arise, not in America, but in his own France. Napoleon the Third took power in a coup d'etat followed by a plebiscite in which he won a totally unbelievable 97% of the vote. He satisfied the Right by imposing law and order and the Left by reining in the power of the wealthy. Flaubert traces the rise of this democratic despot and how his character Sénécal, who begins as a would-be Jacobin who wants to bring back the French Revolution, ends up as a police agent serving Napoleon the Third's dictatorship.

**Solzhenitsyn, *Gulag Archipelago*.**

See especially Volume 2, Conclusion: "The Soul and Barbed Wire." In his harrowing account of his imprisonment in the slave labor camps of Stalin, Solzhenitsyn argues that slave labor was not some kind of unfortunate excess committed on the way to creating a socialist society, but the model for socialism itself—the complete subordination of the individual to the state by forcibly eliminating the rights to property, freedom of expression, and freedom of worship. The inhabitants of the Gulag were what everyone would eventually become, the "New Soviet Man."

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*Book selections and captions by Waller R. Newell, Professor of Political Science and Philosophy and co-director of the Centre for Liberal Education at Carlton College in Ottawa, Canada. His most recent work is *Tyranny: A History of Power, Injustice and Terror*.**